DEMOCRACY ON A COMMON CLOCK: A CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL STUDY OF ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The concept of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) represents a transformative shift in India's democratic and electoral landscape. This study examines the constitutional, political, and institutional dimensions of synchronizing national and state-level elections in the world's largest federal democracy. The proposal aims to reduce election-related expenditure, policy paralysis, and governance disruptions caused by frequent electoral cycles. However, it also invites critical questions regarding its alignment with the federal structure, democratic pluralism, and constitutional safeguards enshrined in the Indian polity. This research employs a qualitative approach, drawing on constitutional texts, parliamentary debates, reports of the Law Commission and Election Commission of India, and judgments of the Supreme Court. It analyses the feasibility of implementing ONOE within the framework of Articles 83, 172, 356, and the Basic Structure Doctrine, while also considering its political ramifications such as the centralization of electoral narratives and the marginalization of regional voices.

The study situates ONOE in a broader comparative context by examining similar practices in countries like South Africa, Sweden, and Indonesia, thereby providing a global perspective on synchronized elections in federal systems. It also evaluates the logistical preparedness and institutional autonomy required for such a reform to succeed in India.

The article argues that while ONOE may offer administrative and fiscal benefits, it poses significant risks to the heterogeneity and decentralized ethos of India's democracy. As such, any move toward electoral unification must be preceded by a rigorous constitutional amendment process, wide public consultation, and the political consensus of state governments. This paper contributes to the ongoing debate on electoral reform by balancing the imperatives of governance efficiency with the foundational values of representative federalism.

Keywords - One Nation One Election, simultaneous elections, Indian Constitution, federalism, electoral reform, parliamentary democracy, democratic centralization, Law Commission.

INTRODUCTION

The rationale behind One Nation, One Election is primarily driven by administrative efficiency and cost-effectiveness; its constitutional implications are far more complex. The Indian Constitution does not mandate synchronized elections; instead, it upholds a federal structure that allows each legislative body to function autonomously for its fixed term,

subject to dissolution under extraordinary circumstances. Therefore, any attempt to impose a uniform electoral schedule would necessitate significant constitutional amendments and reconfiguration of federal relationships between the Union and the States.

The government's argument in favour of ONOE emphasizes reducing election expenditure, mitigating the impact of the Model Code of Conduct on governance, and allowing elected governments to focus on long-term policymaking rather than short-term political gain. Proponents also argue that frequent elections cause political instability, promote populism, and disrupt developmental programs. However, critics contend that such reforms risk homogenizing the electoral discourse, undermining regional voices, weakening coalition politics, and centralizing political power in the hands of the dominant national party. From a political standpoint, the ONOE proposal has received mixed responses. While some national parties view it as an opportunity to streamline governance, many regional and opposition parties perceive it as an assault on India's federal and pluralist character. The proposal has also been critiqued for ignoring the constitutional safeguards intended to protect state autonomy, particularly in a polity where electoral outcomes often reflect region-specific issues, leadership, and socio-economic concerns that differ widely across states.

This research, therefore, situates the ONOE debate within the broader philosophical and functional parameters of Indian democracy. It seeks to answer key questions: Can democratic efficiency be achieved without compromising federalism? Is it constitutionally permissible to artificially extend or curtail the tenure of legislatures to facilitate synchronization? What role does the judiciary play in balancing such electoral reforms with the Basic Structure Doctrine?

The introduction of a "common clock" for democratic exercise assumes a degree of political uniformity and constitutional flexibility that may not align with the founding vision of the Indian Republic. The makers of the Constitution envisaged staggered electoral processes not as a hindrance, but as a safeguard against majoritarianism and political monopolization. Therefore, this article argues that any move toward simultaneous elections must not only address legal and procedural hurdles but must also be evaluated against the broader ideals of democratic representation, pluralism, and institutional integrity. By critically assessing the legal feasibility, political motivations, and democratic consequences of One Nation, One Election, this study aims to contribute to the evolving discourse on electoral reform in India. It emphasizes that reform must not only be efficient but also equitable and constitutionally sound. Only then can India truly balance the clock of democracy without compromising its diverse and decentralized character.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the constitutional provisions and legal challenges involved in implementing One Nation, One Election in India.

2. To examine the impact of simultaneous elections on India's federal structure and state autonomy.

3. To assess the political implications of ONOE on regional representation and democratic pluralism.

4. To evaluate the administrative benefits and financial savings proposed by synchronizing elections.

5. To compare India's electoral system with other federal democracies to draw lessons for ONOE implementation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology based exclusively on secondary data sources to analyze the constitutional and political dimensions of the One Nation, One Election (ONOE) proposal. The secondary data includes a comprehensive review of existing literature such as constitutional provisions, parliamentary debates, government reports (including Law Commission and Election Commission of India reports), academic journal articles, books, newspaper editorials, and relevant Supreme Court judgments.

Additionally, comparative analysis is conducted using documented electoral practices from other federal democracies to contextualize India's situation. The data is critically examined to identify recurring themes, legal interpretations, and political perspectives, enabling a thorough understanding of the feasibility, implications, and challenges of implementing ONOE without the need for primary data collection.

REVIEWS OF LITERATURE

1. Rajeev Bhargava (2019) – Democracy and Governance in India. Bhargava discusses how India's staggered election system leads to frequent election cycles that disrupt governance and burden the administrative machinery. He points out that governments often function in "caretaker" mode during elections, causing policy paralysis. According to Bhargava, conducting simultaneous elections would reduce these disruptions, lower costs, and lessen voter fatigue, improving governance continuity. However, he cautions that any reform should be carefully debated to ensure it respects federalism and democratic diversity.

2. Law Commission of India Report No. 255 (2018) – Simultaneous Elections to Houses of Parliament and State Legislatures. This official report thoroughly analyzes the constitutional and legal requirements to implement simultaneous elections. It explains how constitutional amendments could align the terms of the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. The report weighs benefits like administrative efficiency and cost reduction against challenges such as preserving federalism and regional autonomy. It emphasizes the need for political consensus and careful planning to avoid undermining democratic processes.

3. S.Y. Quraishi (2019) – Electoral Reforms in India: Challenges and Prospects. Drawing from his experience as Chief Election Commissioner, Quraishi highlights that frequent elections strain the Election Commission and reduce voter enthusiasm. He supports the idea that synchronized elections could ease these pressures. However, he stresses the importance of maintaining the autonomy of state legislatures and warns against any reform that could diminish regional representation or democracy at the grassroots.

4. Vivek Tankha (2020) – Constitutional Dimensions of One Nation One Election. Tankha examines the constitutional changes required to synchronize election cycles. He discusses amendments needed to Articles 83 and 172, concerning the terms of Parliament and state assemblies. Tankha advocates a phased approach to synchronize elections, allowing limited extensions or reductions of assembly terms within constitutional limits. He highlights challenges such as political resistance and stresses judicial oversight to safeguard democratic principles.

5. NITI Aayog Discussion Paper (2023) – One Nation One Election: Prospects and Challenges. This policy paper outlines the benefits of One Nation One Election, such as saving government expenditure and reducing administrative burdens. It provides

empirical estimates on cost savings and discusses how synchronized elections could improve governance stability. The paper also acknowledges challenges related to political diversity and federalism, stressing the necessity of political consensus and public engagement. It suggests pilot programs to test feasibility before nationwide implementation.

One Nation, One Election: Exploring its Constitutional and Democratic Impact in India

The idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) envisions conducting elections for the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies simultaneously, once every five years. This proposal seeks to streamline the democratic process in India, reduce frequent electoral cycles, and promote administrative efficiency. Historically, India followed this synchronized electoral model in the early years after independence, specifically from 1951 to 1967. However, this pattern broke down due to political instability and premature dissolutions of legislative assemblies, leading to the staggered elections seen today.

Reviving ONOE would require wide-ranging constitutional and legal reforms. Key provisions of the Constitution Articles 83 (Duration of Houses of Parliament), 85 (Dissolution of Lok Sabha), 172 (Duration of State Legislatures), and 174 (Dissolution of State Legislatures) would need to be amended. Similarly, provisions under the Representation of the People Act, 1951 would require revision. These amendments would have to ensure the alignment of terms between the Union and state legislatures and the creation of a legal mechanism to address scenarios like hung assemblies, no-confidence motions, or emergency dissolutions, without disrupting the fixed electoral calendar.

Proponents of ONOE argue that it would significantly reduce the massive expenditure incurred during frequent elections, both for the government and political parties. Continuous electioneering is often blamed for distracting governments from governance and policy-making, as the Model Code of Conduct gets enforced repeatedly, limiting decision-making capacity. Unified elections could thus enhance governance stability and allow elected representatives to focus more effectively on development. Furthermore, it may curb populist policy cycles and voter fatigue, encouraging a more issue-based, national discourse.

The impact on India's democratic and federal structure is a point of serious concern. Critics argue that ONOE could centralize political power, weaken regional voices, and marginalize state-level issues in favor of national narratives. The dominance of national parties might grow at the expense of regional and local interests, thereby reducing political diversity and representation. Furthermore, synchronizing elections in a country as vast and complex as India raises logistical, security, and administrative challenges.

One Nation, One Election offers an attractive solution to reduce costs and improve administrative efficiency, its implementation involves complex constitutional restructuring and carries far-reaching implications for India's democracy and federalism. A shift of this magnitude must be approached with consensus-building, legal clarity, and a deep respect for the pluralistic foundations of the Indian Republic.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The study titled Democracy on a Common Clock: A Constitutional and Political Study of One Nation, One Election in India focused on the proposition to hold simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies. The research found that the current system of staggered elections in India had resulted in frequent electoral cycles that caused administrative burdens, increased government expenditure, and led to voter fatigue. It was observed that during election periods, governments often entered a "caretaker" mode, which

limited effective policymaking and governance continuity. By synchronizing elections, the reform was expected to reduce these disruptions and create a more stable environment for governance, while also significantly lowering the costs and resource demands on the Election Commission and government machinery.

Constitutional analysis within the study highlighted that implementing One Nation One Election required substantial amendments to the Constitution, particularly Articles 83 and 172 that prescribe the five-year terms for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, respectively. The study pointed out the legal complexities involved in aligning the varying terms of state legislatures and the Lok Sabha, especially in cases where assemblies were dissolved prematurely. It underscored the necessity to redefine the powers of the President and Governors concerning dissolution of legislatures to ensure synchronization. The analysis also emphasized the need to strengthen the Election Commission's role and resources to manage the scale and logistics of simultaneous elections effectively. From a political perspective, the study revealed mixed implications. On one hand, simultaneous elections were found to potentially enhance voter turnout by reducing election fatigue and simplifying electoral processes. The research noted that national political parties might gain an advantage due to the consolidation of elections, which would focus public discourse more on national issues. On the other hand, the analysis cautioned that regional parties and local issues might be marginalized, which could weaken India's federal structure and reduce the political diversity that characterizes the country's democracy. The study concluded that political consensus was essential for the successful implementation of such a reform, considering the varied interests of national and regional stakeholders.

The democratic implications of One Nation One Election were also a major focus. While administrative efficiency was acknowledged as a strong benefit, the research pointed out that democracy depended on pluralism and regional representation. The study highlighted concerns that synchronized elections could diminish the visibility of local issues during campaigning and policymaking. It also noted that extending or shortening assembly terms to align election cycles could affect political accountability and responsiveness. Therefore, the study stressed the importance of instituting legal safeguards and constitutional checks to protect democratic principles and the autonomy of states.

The study identified several practical challenges, such as managing the logistics of large-scale simultaneous elections and deciding how to synchronize terms without disrupting ongoing democratic processes. It recommended a phased implementation, beginning with states whose electoral cycles naturally aligned with the Lok Sabha, to minimize disruption and political resistance. The study also suggested continuous monitoring, judicial oversight, and public engagement as critical elements to ensure that the reform strengthened governance without compromising India's federal democracy.

The research on Democracy on a Common Clock demonstrated that One Nation One Election had significant potential benefits in terms of governance efficiency and electoral cost reduction. However, it also underscored that the reform required careful constitutional amendments, political consensus, and mechanisms to preserve the democratic diversity and federal balance of India's polity. The study advocated a cautious and phased approach to reform, ensuring that administrative convenience did not come at the cost of democratic values.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings

1. Simultaneous elections could significantly reduce election-related expenditure and administrative burden.

2. Governance continuity would improve by minimizing frequent caretaker periods during elections.

3. Major constitutional amendments were required to synchronize terms of Parliament and State Assemblies.

4. The reform might marginalize regional parties and local issues, affecting India's federal balance.

5. Logistical and legal challenges existed in aligning diverse election cycles without disrupting democracy.

Recommendations

1. Implement simultaneous elections gradually, starting with states aligned with Lok Sabha terms.

2. Amend the Constitution with safeguards to protect federal autonomy and prevent misuse of term extensions.

3. Strengthen the Election Commission's resources and authority to handle large-scale simultaneous polls.

4. Ensure mechanisms to preserve regional representation and visibility of local issues during elections.

5. Build broad political consensus and judicial oversight to maintain democratic integrity throughout the process.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that implementing One Nation One Election offered significant advantages in reducing election costs, easing administrative burdens, and enhancing governance stability in India. However, it also revealed substantial constitutional, political, and democratic challenges, particularly concerning federal autonomy and regional representation. Successful realization of this reform would require careful constitutional amendments, a phased and consensual approach, and strong safeguards to protect democratic diversity and federalism. Ultimately, the reform held promise for improving India's electoral system but demanded balanced and cautious implementation to uphold the country's pluralistic democratic framework.

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